

China Ditch: Three miles of fascinating history

Every Monday during the year-long celebration of Washington's Centennial, The Columbian will publish a story looking at an aspect of Clark County's history. The celebration winds up Nov. 11, 1989, when the state will be 100 years old.

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The Columbian

Mix together more than 100 chanting Chinese laborers with a handful of stubborn Finnish farmers and you have the recipe for an interesting bit of Clark County history.

The result was China Ditch, a three-mile, grassy trench that parallels the east side of Northeast 172nd Avenue between Ward Road on the south and Northeast 159th Street on the north.

The ditch was dug in the spring of 1894 by the Chinese who were brought over from Portland by the contractor. The ditch was to serve two purposes. First, it provided more water for the paper mill at Camas, since the ditch leads into Lacamas Creek, which feeds Lac-



mas Lake, source of the mill's water supply. Second, the ditch drained a huge swamp which plagued farmers in the Hockinson area.

Originally called Eureka, a Greek expression meaning "I have found it!" the Hockinson area had been settled by immigrants from Finland and Sweden in the 1870s.

In 1893, the Clarke County commissioners authorized a project under a new drainage district law whereby the farmers benefitting from the ditch would pay for it with a tax levy.

The contractor contacted the "tong boss" in Portland's then-large Chinatown and he supplied the laborers. The Vancouver Independent of May 2, 1894, reported that 100 Chinese, "wearing pig-tails," were busy digging the huge ditch by hand. The dirt from the bottom was shoveled into wicker baskets, which were passed from hand to hand until dumped over the top of the ditch.

The trouble started, according to John Coleman and Englebert Mattson, writing in "From a Forest Clearing," a history of Hockinson, when the Chinese laborers continued working north and appeared to be leaving the Lacamas Creek watershed and heading into the Salmon Creek drainage area.

"When it became apparent the intent was to divert Mud Creek, the farmers became disturbed," according to Coleman and Mattson. Mud Creek is a tiny stream that flows through the community of Hockinson, then swings north to empty into Salmon Creek. The creek provides drinking water for

cattle in the several dairy farms bordering it.

While one of these farmers stood guard with a shotgun, preventing further digging, another went to court in Vancouver seeking an injunction. The farmers won the legal battle, the court ruling that the county had no right to divert water from Salmon Creek to serve a paper mill at Camas, some 10 miles to the south.

"This verdict upheld the right of the state alone to control and protect public waters," said the authors, descendants of the original litigants.

On June 6, 1894, the Independent reported, "The Chinamen who had been at work on Eureka ditch all came into Vancouver with their camp outfit and went over to Portland."

The name China Ditch eventually was assigned to the project. There also is a Shanghai Creek flowing through the area, but it is not known if this can be attributed to the temporary influx of Chinese ditch-diggers.